

²⁹Alan Balboni, *Beyond the Mafia: Italian Americans and the Development of Las Vegas* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1996).

³⁰Alan Balboni, "Southern Italians and Eastern European Jews: Cautious Cooperation in Las Vegas Casinos," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 38:3 (Fall 1995), 153-73.

³¹Simich and Wright, *Peoples of Las Vegas*.

³²The concept of Las Vegas as a "transgressive environment" is developed by Karin Jaschke in her essay "Casinos Inside Out" in *Stripping Las Vegas: A Contextual Review of Las Vegas Casino Resort Architecture*, Karin Jaschke and Silke Otsch, eds. (London: Verso, 2003), 109-32.

³³Claytee White, "The Role of African-American Women in the Las Vegas Gaming Industry, 1940-1980" (M.A. thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1997).

³⁴Myoung-ja Lee Kwon, "An Interview with Sook-ja Kim: An Oral History (Las Vegas: University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1997).

³⁵See, for instance, Adam Woog, *Frank Sinatra* (San Diego: Lucent Books, 2001); P. F. Kluge, *Biggest Elvis* (New York: Viking, 1996); Daniel Mark Epstein, *Nat King Cole* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999); Wil Haygood, *In Black and White: The Life of Sammy Davis, Jr.* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 2003).

³⁶Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); Frances Anderton and John Chase, *Las Vegas: The Success of Excess* (London: Ellipsis Konneman, 1996).

³⁷A summary of Bill Friedman's thought can be found in Jaschke and Otsch, *Stripping Las Vegas*, 69-86. See also Bill Friedman, *Designing Casinos to Dominate the Competition: The Friedman International Standard of Casino Design* (Reno: Institute for the Study of Gambling and Commercial Gaming, 2000).

³⁸Elizabeth Warren, "The History of Las Vegas Springs: A Disappeared Resource" (Ph.D. diss., Washington State University, 2001). The University of Nevada Press will be publishing an updated and expanded version of this work.

³⁹In 1977, the City of Las Vegas, at the behest of Mayor William Briare, commissioned an inventory of sites and structures worthy of preservation. See Charles Hall Page and Associates, Inc., *Historic Preservation Inventory and Guidelines: City of Las Vegas* (San Francisco: n.p., 1978). This report still serves as a reference for preservation activists and would be an excellent source for anyone writing about the area's preservation history and early architecture. Unfortunately, it is currently out of print and in need of updating. In addition, the inventory covers only the city of Las Vegas. We have no comparable volumes for Henderson, North Las Vegas, Boulder City, or Clark County.

⁴⁰Edward E. Baldwin, "Las Vegas in Popular Culture (Ph.D. diss., University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1997).

⁴¹Ed Reid and Ovid Demaris, *The Green Felt Jungle* (New York: Pocket Books, 1963).

⁴²Ovid Demaris, *The Last Mafioso* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981); Drosnin, *Citizen Hughes*; Steven Brill, *The Teamsters* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978); Sheehan, *The Players*. See also Peter Wiley and Robert Gottlieb, *Empires in the Sun: The Rise of the New American West* (New York: G. P. Putnam and Sons, 1982), 191-216; Nicholas Pileggi, *Casino: Love and Honor in Las Vegas* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

Civil Rights and Employment Equity in Las Vegas Casinos

The Failed Enforcement of the Casino Consent Decree, 1971 - 1986

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INTRODUCTION

Alongside the explosive growth of Las Vegas during the midtwentieth century, there arose a cottage industry of popular, academic, and governmental exposés condemning the secret source of the city's success: financing by organized crime syndicates.¹ As publicly traded corporations have come to dominate the Nevada casino market since the 1980s,² the dominant narrative of this part of Nevada history has shifted in tone from denial to a mythology that treats mob funding as a necessary, even romantic, stage in the evolution of an industry long shunned by moralistic mainstream investors.³ Another of the industry's former stigmas has received similar treatment: the Las Vegas casinos' discriminatory practices toward racial minorities. Once labeled bosses of the "Mississippi of the West" because of their refusal to allow minorities to gamble in their stores, Las Vegas casino owners during the 1960s and 1970s—with a little prodding from civil-rights groups and progressive state politicians—opened up their pits to gamblers of all stripes. As with the usurpation of the mob's domain by corporate capital, the casino's "modernization" of their treatment of minority consumers is viewed as having been overdetermined by economic forces, namely, the profit motive: "For the casino owners, economic self-interest would beat out racial anxiety every time . . . The casino resort was now a truly democratic institution that took the money of all gamblers without regard to race, religion, sex, or creed."⁴ Today, the racial demographics of visitors to Las Vegas are remarkably representative of the population of the United States as a whole.⁵

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The main pit of the Sands, 1959. Prior to the 1960s, African Americans were officially excluded as both customers and workers from Strip casinos. (*University of Nevada, Las Vegas Special Collections*)

Though it has received less attention, the struggle to integrate minorities as casino employees exhibits, at first glance, a history parallel to that of consumers. Long excluded from the best casino jobs, racial minorities—after a period of activism and mobilization in the late 1960s—now enjoy substantial representation throughout the casino.⁶ A closer examination of employment statistics, however, reveals that while nonwhite employment has increased substantially, very little progress has been made in integrating African Americans into the better jobs of the casino. They have, in a phrase, been leapfrogged by newer immigrants to southern Nevada from Latin America, east Asia, and even Africa.⁷ Consider the case of casino dealers, historically one of the more prestigious and top-paying positions in the casino (because of the tips—or tokes—that dealers receive). While African Americans constitute 10 percent of the state's population, they currently hold only 7 percent of all dealing jobs in the state; conversely, Asians, who constitute 5 percent of the population, represent 31 percent of the state's dealers.⁸

The under-representation of African Americans is puzzling, considering that they have been established in the Las Vegas community since the World War II era. It also reflects more than just inertia or habit on the part of casino managers, for the hiring and incorporation of African Americans into the pits has been an ongoing concern of civil-rights groups and the federal government for the past three decades. The apex of this struggle is generally acknowledged to be the signing of the civil-rights Consent Decree in June 1971,⁹ according to which the eighteen largest casinos and four main labor unions in Las Vegas were to modernize their labor practices to ensure employment equity. While the decree may be labeled a success in that it improved racial diversity in the casino, it must, in terms of its stated purpose of increasing the representation of African Americans on the casino floor, be considered a failure. Using histori-

cal analysis of the Consent Decree's genesis and subsequent administration, this article will explain the inability of the federal government and civil-rights groups in Nevada to enforce it. First, I describe the events leading up to the decree during the decade of civil-rights activism in the 1950s and 1960s. Second, I revisit the 1971 signing of the Decree itself. Third, the failed attempt by the federal government to expand the terms of the Decree in 1974 is recounted. Finally, I report upon a second failed attempt to enforce the decree, this time by a nonprofit organization representing African Americans in Las Vegas in 1984.

DUAL ATTEMPTS TO DESEGREGATE DURING THE 1950'S AND 1960'S

The End of Consumer Discrimination

We may discern two separate objects of civil-rights activism regarding African Americans during the 1950s and 1960s. The first focused upon their exclusion as consumers, the second as employees. The standard method of casino operation in Nevada prior to World War II entailed prohibiting the state's minorities from gambling in white-owned clubs. Though exceptions were sometimes made for Chinese and Native Americans, African Americans were routinely told to take their business elsewhere.¹⁰ Their play was restricted to clubs operated by Chinese businesspeople and clubs in west Las Vegas owned by African Americans—per a 1931 Las Vegas city resolution stating that casino licenses may be granted to “persons of the Ethiopian race [provided they] cater only to others of that race.”¹¹

The vast investments of federal capital in southern Nevada during the construction of Boulder Dam in the 1930s and the Basic Magnesium plant in the 1940s led to a mass influx of workers and job seekers. The share of African Americans in the state's population increased from 0.6 percent in 1930 to 4.7 percent in 1960, as they migrated from the South in search of work in both federal construction projects and the burgeoning casino industry, which was viewed as offering a chance to make “8 dollars a day in the shade.”¹² During this period, the segregation of minority gamblers intensified. Casino owners justified their practices through reference to the supposed prejudices of the new clientele: conservative tourists and white migrants from the South would be frightened away if asked to share a blackjack table with African Americans. As the editor John F. Cahlan remembered:

People who were operating the hotels and motels of the community were afraid that the tourists from the other parts of the United States—California especially—would resent having to visit a place that was occupied by a black It was just the fact that they wanted to keep their place what they called “clean.”¹³

State officials attempted unsuccessfully to integrate Nevada's casinos and hotels through legislation in 1939, 1949, 1953 and 1957.¹⁴ The election of a progressive governor, Grant Sawyer, in 1958 saw the beginning of the most

sustained attempt by state officials to alleviate consumer discrimination. Motivated in part by fears of adverse publicity preceding the 1960 winter Olympic Games at Lake Tahoe, Sawyer and his allies launched a campaign that eventually overcame the opposition of conservative members of the state legislature; they ultimately succeeded both in establishing a Commission on the Equal Rights of Citizens (CERC) in 1961 and in pushing through a state civil-rights law in 1965. Sawyer later admitted, though, that both were largely symbolic gestures, inadequately funded and enforced.¹⁵ The governor recognized that the only effective form of leverage against casino operators was not through general state labor law, but through the licensing function of the state gambling commission. In an important 1960 opinion, however, Nevada's attorney general Roger D. Foley ruled that the prohibition of discriminatory practices is outside of the purview of gaming regulation.

[Nevada law empowers] the Commission to attach conditions [to a state gaming license] only when those conditions are directly related to *licensing* and *controlling* gaming within the State of Nevada For the Commission, as an administrative agency, to pronounce what civil rights must be observed by state gaming licensees is to extend the Commission's authority beyond the sphere of gaming.¹⁶ [emphasis in original]

The end of official consumer segregation was brought about not by state officials, but through activism on the part of the state's leading black advocacy group, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Through a series of public actions during the late 1950s—the most important of which was a threatened march down the Las Vegas Strip in 1960—the NAACP was able to exert enough direct economic pressure on the leading coalition of casino operators to extract a pledge to desegregate. This concession was solidified in a 1960 meeting at the Moulin Rouge casino. From all accounts, the Moulin Rouge agreement was a success, and casinos effectively desegregated for consumers after 1960. It is interesting, however, that several NAACP leaders later came to view their success as a Pyrrhic victory, insofar as the opening of Strip facilities to African-American consumers led to the disappearance of many Westside businesses.¹⁷

INITIAL ATTEMPT TO INTEGRATE CASINO WORKERS

Having succeeded in integrating casino clients, the NAACP leaders turned their sights to the situation faced by casino workers. The problem, in essence, was the widespread practice of segregating the internal labor market so that African Americans were excluded from the best-paying and most prestigious positions—typically those on the casino floor. While such practices were legally codified only during the first decade of legal gambling—during which the city of Las Vegas banned nonwhites as gaming employees in white-owned casinos—discrimination subsequently became an ingrained aspect of industry



Las Vegas civil rights leaders meet in the late 1950s. From left, attorney Charles Kellar, Woodrow Wilson, Clarence Ray, Jim Anderson and the Reverend Willie Davis. (Clarence Ray Collection)

practice.¹⁸ During the 1940s and 1950s African Americans were routinely employed only in “back of the house” jobs such as maids, porters, and cooks; only rarely did they work as dealers, slot attendants, casino cashiers, and other “front of the house” occupations.¹⁹ The immediate reason for such segregation was the “juice” system that organized casino labor markets. In brief, access to casino jobs was under the control of casino managers and pit bosses, who staffed the pits by drawing upon their personal networks organized around family, ethnicity, city of origin, or personal referral.²⁰ Through this system, Italian-American men came to dominate dealer and floor-management positions in the casinos during this era.²¹

The Las Vegas NAACP's attempt to combat discrimination in the workplace received minimal assistance from Governor Sawyer or the state's Commission on Equal Rights. The organization thus attempted in the first few years of the 1960s to reproduce its successful tactics in fighting consumer segregation during the preceding years. In 1963 James McMillan, president of the NAACP, planned a public picket line on the Strip to protest racially biased labor practices.²² Directly confronted, casino managers defended their hiring and job-placement decisions in several ways: Black dealers would scare away white patrons, lacked the necessary skills, and were unable to complete required training programs. It was even argued that African Americans lacked the inborn skills of numerical calculation necessary to deal the card games:

